



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 10**

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OFFICE OF
ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW
AND ASSESSMENT

December 29, 2016

BOSH Project
Attention: Mike McGee
3948 S Development Avenue
Boise, Idaho 83705

Dear Mr. McGee:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the Bureau of Land Management's Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Boise District Office's Bruneau-Owyhee Sage-grouse Habitat Project (BOSH DEIS), (EPA Region 10 Project Number: 15-0014-BLM).

We conducted our review according to EPA's responsibilities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act. Section 309 specifically directs the EPA to review and comment in writing on the environmental impacts associated with all major federal actions. Our review of the DSEIS considers the expected environmental impacts of the proposed action and whether the EIS meets the procedural and public disclosure purposes of NEPA. We have assigned a LO (Lack of Objections) rating to the BOSH DEIS. A copy of the EPA rating system is enclosed.

Project Summary

The proposed BOSH project boundary encompasses approximately 1.5 million acres in the BLM Owyhee and Bruneau Field Office management areas in Owyhee County, Idaho. Within the proposed project area, an approximately 600,000-acre focal treatment area has been identified, based on modeling and treatment criteria. The preferred alternative is to remove all juniper within 3 kilometers of occupied sage-grouse leks, all juniper in the early phases of encroachment, as well as 5-acre or smaller patches of later phases of juniper encroachment in riparian areas deemed important for sage-grouse in the focal treatment area. The BOSH DEIS also analyzes a No Action alternative and Alternative C - No Treatment in Wilderness Areas.

Juniper Removal Benefits Sage-Grouse

We agree that the loss of suitable sage-grouse habitat from conversion of sagebrush steppe to juniper woodlands is a major threat to Greater Sage-Grouse in southwest Idaho. We also agree that suitable habitat for sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligates would be maintained and improved through the proposed treatment of juniper, and, we appreciate your collaborative approach.

Wilderness Areas and the Causes of Juniper Expansion

Wilderness considerations are central to the BOSH DEIS. The only difference between the action alternatives is the inclusion or exclusion of 47,000 acres of wilderness in the focal treatment area. Given the central importance of wilderness to the range of action alternatives, we appreciate that the BOSH DEIS includes a Minimum Requirements Decision Guide Workbook (Workbook). The Workbook is useful for determining consistency with the Wilderness Act of 1964 because, for example, the Workbook provides direct answers to questions like the following:

Is action necessary to preserve one or more of the qualities of wilderness character, including: Untrammeled, Undeveloped, Natural, Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation, or Other Features of Value?¹

According to the Workbook's answers to this question, the proposed action is not necessary to preserve untrammeled, undeveloped, or solitude qualities of wilderness character. We agree with these determinations. We also agree with the Workbook's determination that this action is necessary to preserve other features of value, namely, the sage-grouse habitat that is specifically recognized in the wilderness areas.

While we agree with the Workbook's conclusions on untrammeled, undeveloped, solitude and other features of value, and we agree with the Workbook's overall determination to take action in wilderness, we suggest that the BOSH Final EIS include additional supporting information for the Workbook's determination that this action is necessary to preserve natural qualities. Namely, the BOSH DEIS clearly supports the Workbook's conclusion that sage-grouse habitat is being encroached upon by juniper. But the claims that this juniper encroachment is a result of "past and current management"² or is "human induced"³ would benefit from additional supporting information, references or rationale. We also believe that an up-to-date and detailed understanding of the causes of juniper expansion in the project area could be useful for planning and adaptively managing the project's long-term and landscape scale vegetation treatments.

In terms of additional information on the causes of juniper expansion, we note that page 10 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2013 *Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Objectives Report* includes a brief literature summary.

Habitat loss is occurring from the expansion of native conifers (e.g., pinyon-pine (*Pinus edulis*) and juniper (*Juniperus* spp.) [pinyon-juniper]), mainly due to changes in fire return intervals and the overstocking of domestic livestock, particularly during the latter 1800's and early 1900's (Miller and Rose 1999); however, these factors may not entirely explain the expansion of western juniper (Soulé and Knapp 1999). Conifer encroachment may be facilitated by increases in global carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentrations, and climate change, but the influence of CO₂ has not been supported by some research (Archer et al. 1995).⁴

For the BOSH Final EIS, we are suggesting that the BLM conduct and report the results of an updated literature review on the causes of juniper expansion in this project's focal treatment area, and - to the extent possible - especially within treatment areas in designated wilderness.

¹ BOSH DEIS, p. 150.

² BOSH DEIS, p. 151.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Accessed online 12/7/16 at: <https://www.fws.gov/greatersagegrouse/documents/COT-Report-with-Dear-Interested-Reader-Letter.pdf>

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. If you have any questions please contact Erik Peterson of my staff at (206) 553-6382 or by electronic mail at peterson.erik@epa.gov, or, myself at (206) 553-1601 or by electronic mail at littleton.christine@epa.gov.

Sincerely,



Christine Littleton, Manager

Environmental Review and Sediment Management Unit

Enclosure:

1. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Rating System for Draft Environmental Impact Statements

**U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Rating System for
Draft Environmental Impact Statements
Definitions and Follow-Up Action***

Environmental Impact of the Action

LO – Lack of Objections

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) review has not identified any potential environmental impacts requiring substantive changes to the proposal. The review may have disclosed opportunities for application of mitigation measures that could be accomplished with no more than minor changes to the proposal.

EC – Environmental Concerns

EPA review has identified environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. Corrective measures may require changes to the preferred alternative or application of mitigation measures that can reduce these impacts.

EO – Environmental Objections

EPA review has identified significant environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to provide adequate protection for the environment. Corrective measures may require substantial changes to the preferred alternative or consideration of some other project alternative (including the no-action alternative or a new alternative). EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts.

EU – Environmentally Unsatisfactory

EPA review has identified adverse environmental impacts that are of sufficient magnitude that they are unsatisfactory from the standpoint of public health or welfare or environmental quality. EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts. If the potential unsatisfactory impacts are not corrected at the final EIS stage, this proposal will be recommended for referral to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ).

Adequacy of the Impact Statement

Category 1 – Adequate

EPA believes the draft EIS adequately sets forth the environmental impact(s) of the preferred alternative and those of the alternatives reasonably available to the project or action. No further analysis of data collection is necessary, but the reviewer may suggest the addition of clarifying language or information.

Category 2 – Insufficient Information

The draft EIS does not contain sufficient information for EPA to fully assess environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment, or the EPA reviewer has identified new reasonably available alternatives that are within the spectrum of alternatives analyzed in the draft EIS, which could reduce the environmental impacts of the action. The identified additional information, data, analyses or discussion should be included in the final EIS.

Category 3 – Inadequate

EPA does not believe that the draft EIS adequately assesses potentially significant environmental impacts of the action, or the EPA reviewer has identified new, reasonably available alternatives that are outside of the spectrum of alternatives analyzed in the draft EIS, which should be analyzed in order to reduce the potentially significant environmental impacts. EPA believes that the identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussions are of such a magnitude that they should have full public review at a draft stage. EPA does not believe that the draft EIS is adequate for the purposes of the National Environmental Policy Act and or Section 309 review, and thus should be formally revised and made available for public comment in a supplemental or revised draft EIS. On the basis of the potential significant impacts involved, this proposal could be a candidate for referral to the CEQ.

* From EPA Manual 1640 Policy and Procedures for the Review of Federal Actions Impacting the Environment. February, 1987.